



Everyday Ethics for Local Officials

The Ethics of Public Language

October 2011

QUESTION

I am new to public service and feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland. I carefully studied my first agenda packet and found it had elements that seemed like a foreign language, with all sorts of unfamiliar phrases and acronyms. The same thing happened at the meeting, where staff, elected officials and others all used terminology that would not be understandable to the average resident trying to follow the discussion and provide input.

This seems wrong. In conducting the public's business, shouldn't we use language that everyone — including the public, media and me — can understand?

ANSWER

Local agency decision-making can indeed have very technical elements. Local agencies need to comply with state laws and judicial decisions that involve various terms of art, many of which are shortened into acronyms. (A term of art is a word or phrase used in a specific field, discipline or profession; in that context, the term of art has a specific meaning, which is generally not the same as its common usage.)

This tip sheet is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on Public Confidence go to <http://www.ca-ilg.org/analyzingdilemmas>

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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The Benefits and Costs of Speaking in Technical Terms

Using technical terms can have a number of benefits:

- **Precision.** Terms of art typically have a specific meaning;
- **Speed.** Acronyms and technical phrases that stand in for complex concepts enable a speaker to apply those concepts to the situation the agency is dealing with or draw connections among complex concepts; and
- **Expertise and Respect.** Some people also believe that knowing and being able to use the language of a given policy area shows their knowledge and expertise in that subject or policy area, which in turn will promote confidence that they know what they are talking about.

However, using technical terminology can also have potential costs:

- **Misunderstandings.** As founding father William Penn noted in promoting plain language, the objective of speech is to be understood. When a public agency uses unfamiliar terminology, the public is likely to misunderstand what the agency is doing and why (or what the public agency is requiring the public to do). The practical consequence of such misunderstanding is having to spend time correcting it. If the technical language is designed to regulate actions or behavior, the agency also is less likely to achieve whatever goals it had in adopting the regulation.
- **Mistrust.** A second potential cost of using technical language is that listeners suspect that the speaker *intends* to be unclear. In his essay *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell observed, “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity” Using unclear language can cause the public and others to question whether the public agency or its officials genuinely want listeners to understand and offer meaningful input on the issue being discussed.

Orwellian Advice From Politics and the English Language

In his 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell criticizes contemporary speech — and particularly political speech — as being designed to hide the truth. He notes that “a scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus:

1. What am I trying to say?
2. What words will express it?
3. What image or idiom will make it clearer?
4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?”

Some of Orwell’s do’s and don’ts for clear speech include:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

- **Lack of Transparency.** Whether intentionally unclear or not, extensive use of technical terminology creates transparency issues. The public’s access to understandable information about decision-making processes and public agency operations is critical to democratic accountability. If the language used by those in public service cannot be understood by the ordinary person, such language restricts meaningful public access to information necessary to understand decisions and hold decision-makers accountable.
- **Expertise or a Put-Down?** Language intended to impress can have the opposite effect. People rarely appreciate being made to feel less knowledgeable — hence the sometimes unflattering label of obtuse speech as “bureaucratese” or “legalese.” As Albert Einstein observed, it takes both genius and courage to make things less complex.

These costs all risk undermining public trust and confidence that public servants are acting in the public’s best interests.

Resources for Making Things Less Complex

If indeed an agency or public official is worried that the potential costs of technical language are too high, plain language can be a goal. “Plain language” involves using words that reflect the interests and needs of the listener or reader rather than the interests and needs of the speaker. The ultimate goal is for everyone to understand what is being said.

The federal government has been working on this issue for decades (ingrained habits can be hard to shake). The products of this effort include www.plainlanguage.gov, which offers a wealth of tips and links to reference materials on improving how government communicates with the public.

Los Angeles County launched a plain-language initiative whose goal is to shift the county’s language culture to a simpler, clearer form, including county contracts. County departments reported significant savings of staff time responding to questions and complaints after translating materials into plain language. The California State Association of Counties honored the effort with its prestigious Challenge Award in 2010 (for more information, visit <http://qpc.co.la.ca.us/pl.asp>).

Helping Newly Elected Officials Understand Local Government

The Institute for Local Government (ILG) offers a number of resources to help newly elected officials understand the processes and policy areas where they now play an important role. These include materials that explain:

- How [local agencies make decisions](#) and who’s responsible for what;
- Where [county and city revenues](#) come from, and [questions for local officials to ask in making sure an agency’s financial practices are up to snuff](#);
- [Land use decision-making](#), including plain-language “one-pagers” that local agencies can use as [attachments to public hearing notices](#);
- [Public service ethics laws and principles](#); and
- The role [counties play in delivering health services](#).

All of these resources are available through ILG’s “Local Government 101” page at www.ca-ilg.org/localgovt101.

The Center for Plain Language (<http://centerforplainlanguage.org>) declares that “plain language is a civil right” and offers support and resources for those interested in using plain language.

Writing in plain language is work. The philosopher-scientist Blaise Pascal is famously quoted as apologizing for a long letter because he “lacked the time to make it shorter.” To help local agencies save time in translating commonly used concepts and terminology in local decision-making, the Institute for Local Government (ILG) offers a number of resources designed to help newly elected officials, the media and others understand some of the complex terminology underlying policy discussions at the local level. These include:

- **Land Use** — As part of its *Land Use Basics* series, ILG offers a *Glossary of Land Use* terms and acronyms (www.ca-ilg.org/PlanningTerms and www.ca-ilg.org/PlanningAcronyms) to help everyone understand some of the technical terminology in this area. In addition, ILG provides a series of plain-language one-page explanations that local agencies can offer the public in conjunction with public hearings and other processes to involve the public in the land use decision-making process (www.ca-ilg.org/onepagere); and
- **Labor Relations and Pensions** — ILG recently published glossaries to help local officials, the media and the public understand the technical language related to the public pension debate (www.ca-ilg.org/PensionGlossary) and associated collective bargaining terminology (www.ca-ilg.org/LaborRelationsGlossary).

The general goal of ILG’s “Local Government 101” program (www.ca-ilg.org/localgovt101) is to help make the local governance process in California more accessible and understandable to its participants. A number of these resources are available in both English and Spanish. ILG invites local agencies to link to these resources from agency websites.

Beyond Plain Language

Making a commitment to plain language is an important step in connecting the public with local agency decision-making processes. Creating programs that help the public learn more about how local government works is another step local agencies have taken. These leadership programs provide an important tool to help residents understand and engage in local issues. There are currently more than 30 general leadership academies and 70 citizen and police academies on the roster.

A list of these programs can be found on the Institute for Local Government (ILG) website (www.ca-ilg.org/CitizenAcademiesRoster) as part of a resource center to help local officials interested in creating or enhancing their agencies’ efforts in this area (www.ca-ilg.org/localcivics). ILG is also collecting stories about these academies to share on its website. To share your agency’s story, visit www.ca-ilg.org/publicengagementstoryform.